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Whatever happened to cyberpunk?

The literary genre defined by William Gibson's *Neuromancer* had a massive influence on pop culture. But the cultural future it described is now both daily reality, and a distant digital past

John Mullan rereads *Neuromancer*, 30 years on



Lost in cyberspace ... Keanu Reeves in *The Matrix Reloaded* Photograph: Snap Stills/REX/Snap Stills/REX

Damien Walter

Friday 7 November 2014 02.30 EST

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The girl in the black vinyl minidress, shit-kicker boots and neon hair braids told me she was a cyberpunk. “Wow,” I answered, shouting over the club’s

thumping techno-trance beat, “I love William Gibson.” I may as well have namechecked Samuel Taylor Coleridge at a Metallica gig. She stared at me for a while, then shouted back “I’m not into the [Bee Gees](#).”

Pop culture rarely recognises its influences, especially when they are literary. But it’s a testament to just how closely attuned William’s Gibson’s work was to the zeitgeist, that in 1992 cyberpunk was [manifesting in the cultural interface](#) where [80s goth met 90s techno](#).

Gibson was a decade into his writing career by the time I came face to face with a cyberpunk on the dancefloor. Neuromancer, which celebrated the [30th anniversary of its publication this year](#), was one of those books I read over and over again, tearing through his Sprawl trilogy and the handful of short stories he had published in Omni magazine through the early 80s.

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Hungry for more, I picked up the [Mirrorshades anthology edited by Bruce Sterling](#). Despite strong stories such as Solstice by James Patrick Kelly and Petra by Greg Bear, the truth was that none of the other writers who became associated with cyberpunk were doing what Gibson was doing.

The science fiction and fantasy novels I’d read before Neuromancer all offered shades of escapism. Going back to the SF genre after reading Gibson, I realised with disappointment that, with few exceptions, escapism was all it offered. Gibson expressed his own discontent with the the genre of SF in his [2011 interview with the Paris Review](#), describing his early novels as a “dissident influence” against the genre.

I wasn’t reading [William Gibson](#) to escape reality, I was reading him because his

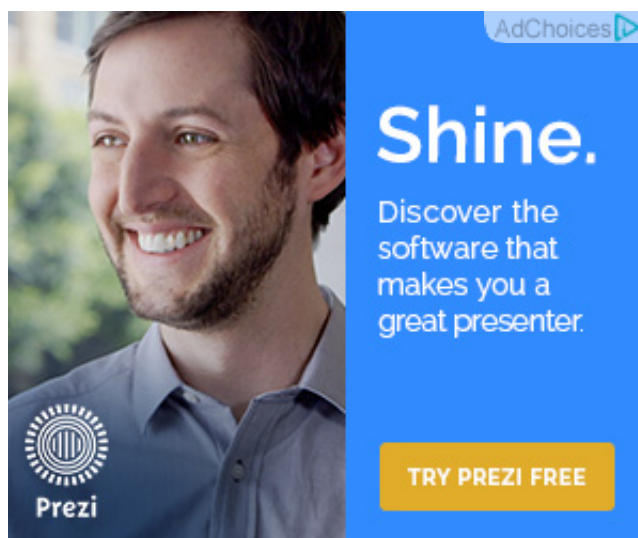
writing was the best description I could find of the reality I was growing up in. It wasn't predicting the future that made *Neuromancer* important. It was charting, through the metaphors of sci-fi, the psychological reality of a society being profoundly disrupted by technology that made Gibson's writing exceptional.

Gibson's idea of cyberspace, and the virtual reality technology used to access it, weren't a literal prediction of the future, but as metaphors they did accurately capture our disembodied relationship to technologies such as smartphones and tablet computers. Our bodies are staring, blank-eyed in to glowing lights behind panes of glass, while our minds are navigating intense, complex, immersive digital realities.

By the 90s this [screen culture](#) was still limited to the television and cinema. But the number of television channels was multiplying, and films were becoming more powerful as CGI made it possible to create ever more believable realities on screen. And it was clear to anyone who knew how to look, and particularly to an artist like Gibson, that these screens could exert powerful control over the minds immersed in them.

Being a teenager in the 90s was like living half your life in a digital mind-control experiment, as advertisers vied to control our spending patterns. Here in 2014, where screens occupy every corner of our world, I'm guessing being a teenager is like living 98% of your life in a digital mind control that is no longer experimental. It was this pervasive cultural coercion that cyberpunk kicked against, whether it was through books like *Neuromancer*, or kids getting dressed up like goths to go to their local nightclub.

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An advertisement for Prezi. On the left is a portrait of a smiling man with a beard. To his right is a blue rectangular box containing the text 'Shine.' in large white font, followed by 'Discover the software that makes you a great presenter.' in smaller white font. At the bottom of the blue box is a yellow button with the text 'TRY PREZI FREE' in black. In the bottom left corner of the advertisement, there is a circular logo with vertical lines and the word 'Prezi' below it. In the top right corner of the blue box, there is a small 'AdChoices' icon.

Like every other rebellious subculture from hippies to hip-hop, cyberpunk was

quickly reabsorbed in to consumerism. By 1999 the imagery of cyberpunk, much of it originating from Japanese anime such as Akira and Ghost In The Shell, was so familiar that it could be recycled wholesale as a Hollywood blockbuster in The Matrix. In literature, cyberpunk was quickly ground down from a “dissident influence” to a worn-out sub-genre, as hundreds of books co-opted Gibson’s style but entirely missed his message.

Gibson’s art continued along its own path. By Pattern Recognition in 2001 his novels had caught up with the near future they once foreshadowed. Are they still science fiction? Their combination of realism and subtle but significant science fictional ideas makes them perhaps the clearest example of [transrealism](#) in mainstream literature. Gibson’s new novel The Peripheral takes the author back to the future.

The cultural moment that cyberpunk described has passed, and the future Gibson wrote towards has now become the past.

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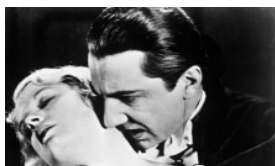
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1 2



theorbys

22h ago

1

I was in my 50s when you were in your teens and cyberpunk, especially Gibson, created a kind of consensual fictional space, definitely consensual, where we could absorb something unique in human history, an emerging fantastical tech future that was tangibly real and becoming real, not all of it, but more than enough. It was the first time science fiction and reality were fusing. Gibson, above all Gibson, cyberpunk and Wired magazine were helping us interpret and assimilate not the technology so much as the experience of it all happening. But assimilate it we did and while there may still be some sense of wonder to it all, to knowing our next gadget will have a 3D virtual screen and more computing power than a Cray, or whatever, there is just not that **freshness** to the sense of wonder that the good old days of Gibson's early writing brought. It really isn't that cyberpunk passed and that its future has become the past, it's just that we have changed, individually and collectively we are no longer living those psychologically magic tech times of the shadowy world of the future emerging into our present as fresh and rich and strange. Gibson's cyberpunk caught those times in fiction and helped some of us make sense of them. And that is just what art is supposed to do. Here I am now in my 70s and thinking back very fondly on those good old cyberpunk days and very grateful to Gibson for his writing skills for making them feel like such good old days.

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[theorbys](#) [theorbys](#)

0

PS I don't mean to downplay the gritty hard boiled noir aspects of Gibson's writing and maybe they helped ease us into his transitional fiction space because they were already out there as far back as the 30s. Sam Spade would have functioned without problems in a cyberpunk world. On the other hand his seminal idea of cyberspace itself as consensual shared hallucination is probably something we have not yet gotten to the bottom of.

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Samantha Rule

3d ago

0

A handful of years ago, I stumbled across David J Rodger. He's written quite a few novels, and an impressive collection of short stories, steeped in the Cyberpunk climate. I can't recommend strongly enough a peek into the dark gritty vision he has created in the realm of noir near-future, of high tech and low life.

[His set of novels, with newly revamped covers.](#)

[One of my favorite collections of short stories.](#)

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Kinslowdian

7d ago

1

For some reason the bad gothic look of these films always reminds me of Nottingham

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[Roverbrighton](#) [Kinslowdian](#)

0

I know exactly what you mean - Nottingham is the future.

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William Alan Gosline

10 Nov 2014

1

I remember where I was standing when I read the first line of Neuromancer. It was that out of whack with what other writers were doing at that time. Gibson will join the ranks of the writers whose work become eponymous with their era. His imitators will disappear. Thus is the way of the world.

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tmabona

9 Nov 2014

1

Richard Morgan came sort of close with Kovac for a while there... bring Takeshi back!

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[reply](#)[report](#)**DamienGWalter** [tmabona](#)

2

CONTRIBUTOR

Never enjoyed Morgan's writing. Like a very long winded description of screenplay, no?

[Reply](#)[Report](#)**Kylein MacKellerann**

1

9 Nov 2014

Cyberpunk? He grew up, got a job and moved to the suburbs with his wife and 2.24 children.

[Reply](#)[Report](#)**NeonDystopia**

0

9 Nov 2014

Take a look at recently released and currently in-development digital games and you'll realise Cyberpunk isn't on its way out at all. Much the opposite.

Murder

Brigador

Metrocide

Cyberpunk 2077

Satellite Reign

Dex

Dreamfall Chapters

Collateral

Interference

There's obviously more, but there's a couple of AA/AAA titles there and a lot of indie ones.

Anyway, keep an eye on www.NeonDystopia.com because it'll be launching soon. It's a website focused on sharing cyberpunk content and analysis, new and old.

[Reply](#)[Report](#)**DamienGWalter** [NeonDystopia](#)

0

CONTRIBUTOR

I don't see any depth in video games however, literally all style, no substance.

[Reply](#)[Report](#)**NeonDystopia** [DamienGWalter](#)

0

What do you mean by depth and 'all style, no substance'? Are you talking about there being no gritty cyberpunk 'core' in there, or more in terms of games simply using a cyberpunk aesthetic for what could be any type of game underneath?

Either way, a cyberpunk game may not be called such just because it takes place in a futuristic

urban dystopia.

Great video games form a gestalt. Most of these games have you actively partaking in actions typical of the cyberpunk tradition; hacking, investigating, violence, and theft. Not only that, but they can also tell fantastic stories, take place in a well-developed setting/world, and have stunning art direction.

I'm struggling to find a way to agree with your comment, though perhaps these games could put players in the shoes of someone other than a super-soldier for a change and really explore the seedy underbelly of a cyberpunk city (in more depth than some already have).

www.NeonDystopia.com

Reply

Report

DamienGWalter NeonDystopia

0

CONTRIBUTOR

Well, if Neuromancer was about our disembodied relationship to technology, what are these games about? Remember, few of the idea in Neuromancer when "typical" when written. Gibson invented them - cyberspace for example - as metaphors for the books meaning. What metaphors do these games introduce?

Reply

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Ethan Davidson

0

8 Nov 2014

From where I sit, it seems that cyberpunk was replaced by steam punk, which became another form of cosplay, or in other words, just another excuse for the young folks to dress up and perhaps try on a corset. Anyhow, I'm sure there is more to it than that, I just don't pay that much attention. When I was a just plain punk, interactions with screens was limited to going to a seedy theatre that mixed art films with grindhouse. Or an all night party space that showed rock videos before there was an MTV.

Reply

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Rydell

4

8 Nov 2014

You are focused on certain aspects of that particular form of cyberpunk, which undoubtedly has somewhat come to pass (yet also still looks like a potential future).

The wider themes of Cyberpunk still resonate and that's why cyberpunk still exists and is being written it just looks differently because it looks forward to the potential future with an eye to current trends. All the examples about AI, interconnectivity and virtual worlds half exist now. They don't really in the way they do in most cyberpunk, we still are looking forward to those. We are also looking forward to the new tech emerging. Then there is the other side of cyberpunk, the literary styles and examination of the political/social aspect of the genre which doesn't go away. That's why there are so many -punk subgenres now. They explore different tech potentials with

the same principles as steampunk.

For example *The Wind Up Girl* (Hugo winner) essentially looks at the roots of the current revolution occurring in biotech and uses the cyberpunk mould to explore the far flung potential of that in the way Gibson did with networked computers (it's called a biopunk novel by some).

If anything the genre becomes more prescient, along with all scifi but specifically cyberpunk, as technological advances have exploded in the last 35 years and we begin to consider the social ramifications of these technologies as they mature.

Also *Nueromancer* is still a fantastic book and a timeless classic.

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Keoki1

8 Nov 2014

0

Some of Gibson's descriptions like the sleeping capsules in in the New Rose hotel have stayed in my mind since *Burning Chrome* first came out. I've been reading Ken Macleod lately; he mixes social and political senerios from the day after tomorrow with the far future.

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DamienGWalter

Keoki1

CONTRIBUTOR

1

I think the sleeping capsules already existed when Gibson was writing...Japan WAS the future ;)

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Johnh259

8 Nov 2014

0

Interesting read especially the contention that *Neuromancer* is now (not quite, can you imagine jacking into the internet, especially into the jungle below the line - no thanks!)

Great to see David Rodger's work getting some love in the comments section too, I'm a big fan, you should definitely check out his work, especially since I think they've just been reissued in new editions. <http://davidjrodger.wordpress.com/> definitely worth a read.

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DoctorTOC

8 Nov 2014

0

I'm pleased to see I'm not the only person enjoying the works of David J Rodger. He's doing a great job of redefining cyberpunk in light of the realities of 21st Century sociopolitics and technology, with an added vein of cosmic horror as spice.

<http://davidjrodger.wordpress.com/2014/10/29/eight-fantastic-new-covers-buy-the-set-with-15-discount-from-lulu/>

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**Jiwonsi**

8 Nov 2014

1

Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* is quite a good post-cyber punk novel, where multinational corporations are powerful enough to survive the end of the global economy (as well as the United States).

Ghost in the Shell is a bit dated, if only because mobile phones and the internet seem to be missing; *Psycho-Pass* is a more interesting depiction of a near-future Japan that has become a technological utopia.

[Reply](#)[Report](#)**DamienGWalter****Jiwonsi**

CONTRIBUTOR

1

There's some excellent post-cyberpunk material, Charlie Stross included.

[Reply](#)[Report](#)**concernedcitizen11**

7 Nov 2014

0

The best cyberpunk novel I have read was David Rodger's Iron Man Project. Even in Australia, David is making an impact with his near-future thriller. Worth a read: www.davidjrodger.wordpress.com

[Reply](#)[Report](#)**LRRyan****concernedcitizen11**

0

Agreed, Rodger writes a hell of a story; his novel *God Seed* holds the reader's attention with good writing and delivers meaningful action. The association with Gibson is spot on!

[Reply](#)[Report](#)**MightyMightyMan**

7 Nov 2014

1

I quite like *Ghost in the Shell*. I always think they should remake it live action with Aubrey Plaza as Kusanage and Ron Perlman as Bato. Maybe Stephen Amell as Togusa and Avery Brooks as The Puppetmaster. I know, I spend a lot of time thinking about this.

[Reply](#)[Report](#)**Robofish**

7 Nov 2014

1

I tried reading *Neuromancer* for the first time not long ago, and found it painfully dated - strangely more so than many older SF novels. Nothing is as out of fashion as the (relatively) recent past. Like *Blade Runner*, it's cool but feels trapped in a 1980s alternate future that never happened.

(Although, to a considerable extent the predictions of cyberpunk actually came true, even if the aesthetics didn't last. Perhaps that's what killed it more than anything.)

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ShutUpBanks

7 Nov 2014

3

Neuromancer is beautiful: Gibson is an excellent stylist. But I was never a fan of cyberpunk: it seemed more like a reaction to aspects of SF rather than a movement on its own. From a viewpoint of even just a few years into the 90s it seemed to be quite evangelical about a particular vision of the future that nobody really believed would arrive. Personally, I think it found its natural home in comics.

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hureharehure

7 Nov 2014

5

Being a teenager in the 90s was like living half your life in a digital mind-control experiment, as advertisers vied to control our spending patterns.

I don't remember it that way at all. I feel it was much easier to drop out from advertising culture, and much easier to find other cultures to participate in that had little or nothing to do with professional advertising -- going to raves, say, or making and reading zines. To turn a blind eye that way now requires a special blocking app and far more dedication. More importantly, perhaps, marketing was considered thoroughly uncool. The idea of being a "sellout" still had some bite, and anyone using a phrase like "price point" in an effort to sound insider-y would've been laughed at. Now even people who don't work in marketing sometimes try to sound as if they do.

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DamienGWalter
hureharehure

CONTRIBUTOR

1

Sure, it was only half of life then, so you could stay in the other half. Now it looks like the whole thing.

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Loftywinds

7 Nov 2014

0

I think the best and yet to be fulfilled prophecy from science fiction writers had to be Issac Isamov's 9 Tomorrows

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Maltycultural

7 Nov 2014

4

The thing I found (and stil find) most interesting is the idea of a future where tech rules our lives, but many can not afford It, or afford to have it repaired. This sets up the multiple class society. I think we are seeing this more and more.

I think everyone should move on to the excellent and underrated works of neil asher. His creation, Mr Crane, has to be one of the best written characters I have read.

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MikeAlx **Maltycultural**

3

I think you could add to that the increasing dominance of faceless corporations, the privatisation of everything and the erosion of power of democratic institutions. All very present in Neuromancer, and very much on the money.

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RainbowTrout

7 Nov 2014

1

I quite liked Walter Jon Williams *Hardwired*. The only "recent" Gibson that I have read is *Spook Country*. Quite liked it.

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MrFitzwilliamDarcy

7 Nov 2014

1

Neuromancer, and to a lesser degree the other two 'Sprawl' novels, are still great reads. They have their flaws - as remarked above, Gibson doesn't really 'do' characters - and 'the future' didn't turn out exactly how he envisaged, but plenty of tropes from those books have come to be part of our vision of now and the near future, in much the same way as the movie of Blade Runner influenced the way we see those things. The descriptive writing is amazing; that first sentence of Neuromancer is already obsolete given the demise of CRT televisions, but it grabbed me immediately in 1984, and still gives a cold rush to this day.

And, of course, Molly/Sally is impossibly cool and plays right into all my domme-female fantasies, originally fired up by Cathy Gale and Emma Peel... I know, but I can't help it.

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Chiburi Splash

7 Nov 2014

1

Everyone should read "Ready Player One", by Ernest Cline.

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Craig Stewart **Chiburi Splash**

2

Everyone should read the back cover and then put it back down. I've read Frosties packets

with more to say.

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[AlleinAllein](#) [Chiburi Splash](#)

0

They shouldn't. If it gets any more popular, it will get adapted into the movie he so obviously wishes for.

[Reply](#)

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MENTAL1ST

7 Nov 2014

4

All this way down and nobody's mentioned Neal Stevenson.

After reading Snow Crash and The Diamond Age, I found it hard to enjoy Gibson's work.

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[fabrisse](#) [MENTAL1ST](#)

1

My favorite Stephenson's are Cryptonomicon and The Cobweb (written under a pseudonym with a partner). I love all his work, but he does write doorstoppers.

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[fabrisse](#) [MENTAL1ST](#)

0

Read his short story in Hieroglyph. It's an interesting project.

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[MrFitzwilliamDarcy](#) [MENTAL1ST](#)

0

Quite possible to enjoy both, of course... Crytonomicon is fab - if verrrry long - and Neuromancer is fab, and short... I love them both.

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psikeyhackr

7 Nov 2014

3

Reading what literary people have to say about science fiction is such an aggravating bore. Was cyberpunk ever supposed to be taken seriously. William Gibsom has admitted that he really didn't know anything about computers when he wrote Neuromancer. Cyberpunk was nothing but a style it was not really cyber.

Check out The Two Faces of Tomorrow by James P. Hogan. That is CYBER.

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